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SUBJECT: PARTIES GEAR UP EARLY FOR 2011 ELECTIONS

REF: LUSAKA 405

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In an unusual move, the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) endorsed President Rupiah Banda as its 2011 presidential nominee on June 14. The endorsement is out of sync with previous candidate selection procedures, which typically began at a national convention held the year prior to elections. Some observers suggested that the move was a direct response to the recently-announced Patriotic Front (PF)/United Party for National Development (UPND) electoral alliance but, whatever the motive, Banda clearly is moving to consolidate his tenuous and unsure hold over the party. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Members of the MMD's NEC emerged from a meeting on June 14 to announce that committee members had selected Rupiah Banda as the party's candidate for a planned convention in 2010 and for the presidential elections in 2011. Such an announcement is a departure from previous practice, in which would-be contenders for the party nomination announced themselves in advance of the party convention and a secret ballot of party members was held to choose the nominee.

While MMD spokesperson (and Banda supporter) Benny Tetamashimba told reporters that others could present themselves as potential nominees at the next convention, he also said that the NEC had decided to present Banda as the "sole" candidate at the convention. He also alleged that all the NEC members who stood against Banda in the lead-up to 2008's presidential election (including former Minister of Finance Ng'andu Magande) supported Banda's candidature for 2011.

¶3. (SBU) Leaders of the nine provincial MMD executive committees wasted no time in endorsing Banda's nomination. Press reports from independent newspaper "The Post" suggest that the MMD timed its maneuver to counter the recent electoral alliance between the UPND and the PF (reftel). In a national address on June 25, President Banda spent some time discrediting the alliance as well as the UPND and PF leadership, despite claiming to be unconcerned about their electoral prospects. PF spokesperson Given Lubinda shared with The Post newspaper that the PF-UPND pact holds promise as similar pacts formed in 1963 and 1972 elections proved victorious. (Note: In the 2008 presidential by-election, PF's Michael Sata and UPND's Hakainde Hichilema pulled in a total of 58 percent of the vote. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Comment: The preemptive strike by Banda and his proxies in the NEC is an attempt to enforce party discipline and unity, which the beleaguered president needs as he faces corruption scandals and an increasingly skeptical public. As the PF/UPND alliance positions itself with a "unifying Zambians" message, the pressure on the MMD increases, and Banda's pressure tactics may backfire by causing presidential hopefuls, within and outside Banda's cabinet, to abandon the MMD ship. The lack of openness in the candidate selection process may also reinforce some criticism that the MMD leadership is far removed from the concerns of its grass-roots members, as well as criticism that a party that was founded on the concept of political pluralism exhibits little democratic openness in the selection of its representatives.

BOOTH